4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

175 755 787 781

(iii) Giovanna Debrincat had been suffering from depression with religious scruples for eight months. Her symptoms became acute one day in February with extreme anxiety, agitation, and insomnia. This phase lasted for four consecutive days and nights in spite of the efforts of the doctor and a priest to reassure her and placate her. Finally her relatives annointed her with the sanctuary oil and appealed to the Blessed Virgin to cure her. The patient immediately became tranquil and had a peaceful sleep. When she woke up, all her symptoms had disappeared (*Iddevot ta Maria*, 1890).

532 172 782 [171]

NEOLITHIC VOTIVE OFFERINGS

The custom of offering 'ex-votos' to the deity for favours received is not limited to the Maltese Islands and goes back to very remote times. The neolithic 'ex-votos' of Malta are made of clay and limestone, and measure from 1¼ to 3¼ inches in height. No less than fifteen of them, consisting of the following anatomical forms, have been found:

(i) Faces: 2.
(ii) Hand: 1.
(iii) Female torsos with large abdomen, pendulous breasts, and prominent genitalia: 4.
(iv) Kneeling female (?) torso with arms folded on breast: 2.
(v) Fragment of female statuette consisting of lower abdomen, both thighs, and right leg: 1.
(vi) Female body cut short in the neck and upper parts of the thighs; the left arm is bent on the nape of the neck and the right upper limb points to the genitalia which are very clearly shown. The abdomen and breasts are very full and a swelling fills the left groin while pieces of white shells are stuck in the armpits, groins, umbilicus, mons veneris, and other parts.
(vii) Female pelvis with upper parts of thighs and sexual triangle: 2.
(viii) Legs: 2 (Zammit & Singer 1924, p. 67).

17 782 [997]

The Roman occupation of Malta (218 B.C.–A.D. 397) is represented by one solitary 'ex-voto' consisting of a clay model of the lateral view of a leg and foot. It was found quite recently with other Roman objects in the north-west part of the island (Plate 1, Fig. 2). The inhabitants of the Maltese Islands were converted to Christianity by St Paul in A.D. 60. No more 'ex-votos' can be traced for many hundreds of years until they reappear in the eighteenth century under the influence of the Catholic Church. The interruption in the time-sequence and the change of religious beliefs do not, however, prevent us from perceiving that they have a common purpose and that the 'ex-votos' of Stone Age and Roman times foreshadow the similar ones of later years. Indeed the same ideational process links the ancient ones with those of our own times.

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Anatomical 'ex-votos' are still preserved in many of the Catholic churches of Malta and Gozo and in several wayside shrines in the countryside and in niches in the towns. They are either figures of the complete human body or of parts of it. The former consist of the front view of babies with the trunk and limbs swathed in bands like a mummy; and of side views of men and women in a kneeling posture with their hands joined in prayer over their breasts or else holding a symbolical heart. The men are turned towards the left and the women look towards the right. The models representing parts of the

PLATE I

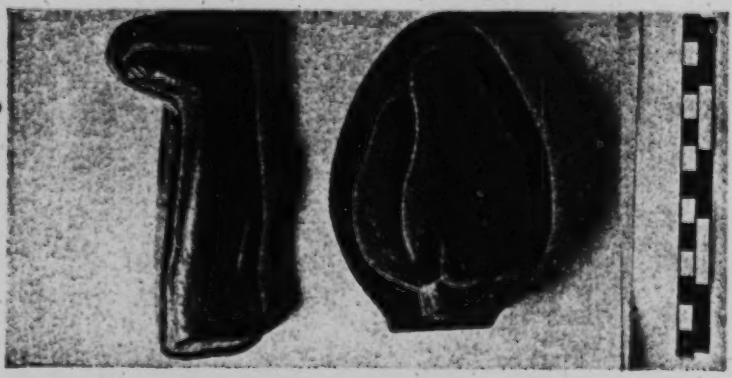

FIGURE 3

[172]

FIGURE 2

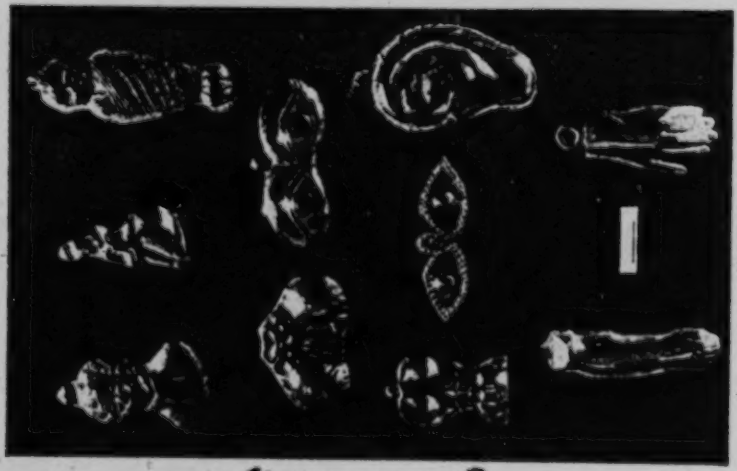

FIGURE 1

[Captions appear on p. 29.- An.) [facing P. 24]

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

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[291]

FIGURE 1

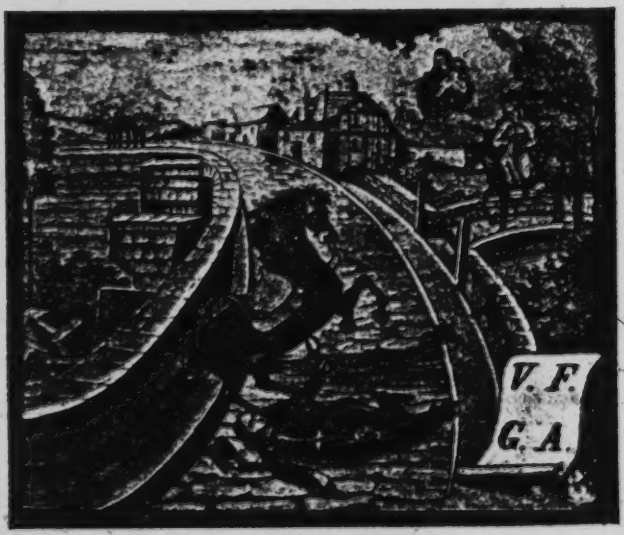

FIGURE 2

[facing P. 25]
[captions appear on p. 29 - An.]

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

body include faces, eyes, ears, upper limbs, hands, trunks, female breasts, hearts, thighs, legs, and feet (Plate 1, Fig. 1). Although they show no deformities and no pathology they indicate the part affected by illness and healed by divine intercession. Thus 'legs were offered for paralysis, congenital anomalies and chronic ulcers in the lower limbs; 'arms' and 'hands' for fractures and threatened loss of fingers by injury or gangrene; 'ears' for deafness and otitis; and 'eyes' for a variety of ocular diseases. Sometimes, however, the association of illness and anatomical part is not so specific; thus 'trunks' were offered for such varied conditions as throat affections, hernias, and mental disorder; 'faces' for enlarged glands in the neck; and pairs of female 'breasts' for deficiency of milk in a lactating mother as well as disease of these organs.

They were made of wax or of raised work in gold and silver foil. Those met with at present are the silver ones, the others having disappeared from the churches though they were still being offered at the end of the last century if not later. There are records of wax effigies of arms, legs, eyes, and babies and also of gold ones having been deposited at that period at Ta Pinu Church at Gharb in Gozo. A pair of gold legs cost £17 (*Id-devot ta Maria* 1890; Kerr 1893). Wax figures also existed until some thirty years ago in the small church of Ta' Mirakli at Lija (Tanti 1962). These objects were manufactured in Malta but some of them were imported from Sicily and North Africa. The gold and silver foil was hammered into the desired shape over dies of bronze by a silversmith (Plate 1, Fig. 3). They vary in size from 6 by 2½ inches to 1 by 3½ inches. Some of them bear hall-marks which help to date them and identify the source of manufacture. The earliest met so far by the writer is a stylized silver model (in the writer's collection) of a pair of female breasts impressed with the hall-marks of the Grand Master of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, Em. de Rohan who ruled over the Maltese Islands from 1775 to 1797.

The deposition of anatomical 'ex-votos' in Maltese churches ceased in 1935. The ecclesiastical council held in that year in Malta under the presidency of Cardinal H. Lepicier disallowed the exhibition of 'votive offerings showing parts of the human body except those in the shape of a heart', (*Concilium*, 1935, p. 60), so that the present-day visitor will hardly see anything else except 'hearts' hanging by the statues of the saints to whom they were offered by grateful devotees. The more 'profane' models have been melted and converted into sacred utensils for the church service.

Very occasionally instead of an anatomical representation, we come across a silver tablet commemorating deliverance from illness. Here is a specimen inscribed in Latin:

P. Trapani cum suis / A. MDCCCLXXXVII / Ab Asiana Lue /
Incolumos (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1888).

that is P. Trapani and his family spared from the Asiatic Disease of the year 1887.

(The Asiatic Disease was cholera of which Malta had seven outbreaks during the last century. The 1887 epidemic lasted three and a half months and had a mortality of over 50 per cent.)

Quite often the making of a vow was accompanied by the recitation of prayers and by touching the diseased part with some object associated with the healing saint. These actions include the smearing of the part, in the form of a cross, with oil obtained from the sanctuary lamp; touching the part with a sacred image or medal; sipping water in which rose-petals from the altar, dedicated to the saint or Virgin, had been immersed;

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

782 755 drinking from the spring of the grotto at Mellieha village where the Holy Virgin is venerated; or placing some earth on the sick person from the tomb of a hermit reputed to have died in odour of sanctity in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 16).

755 782 214 [204] Sometimes the donation of an 'ex-voto' was coupled with the publication, in a religious periodical, of the circumstances of the illness and its extraordinary cure. The following are typical case-histories, translated from Maltese, culled at random from such a periodical:

(i) Victoria Conti, who had been suffering from deafness in the right ear for four years, was told by two doctors that her condition was incurable. She prayed to the Holy Mary and as soon as she placed the oil from the sanctuary of Ta Pinu (Gharb, Gozo) on her ear she regained her hearing.

(ii) A woman fell from the balcony of her house and, as a result, had a series of convulsions, lost the faculty of speech, and became moribund. She remained in this precarious state for fifteen days when her parents promised the offer of a silver 'ex-voto' to the Holy Virgin if their daughter recovered. The following night the patient began to regain consciousness and to talk. She made steady progress and was well within a short time.

(iii) Joseph Spiteri, from Zabbar, had a mentally sick brother who, in a fit of frenzy, cut his throat. The doctor declared the case a hopeless one but, following a vow to the Mother of Christ, the patient began to improve until he recovered from his wound and from his mental illness within nine weeks.

(iv) Clo. Monsignier had measles and almost lost his eyesight as a complication. His mother vowed to the Virgin Mary that she would offer a silver 'ex-voto' in the shape of a pair of eyes if his sight was spared. Immediately this promise was made, the boy opened his eyes from which all the signs of disease had disappeared (*Id-devot ta Maria* 1894–9).

Other published accounts deal with cases of throat infections, puerperal sepsis, hyperpyrexia (up to 107° F), and trachoma. To appreciate the seriousness of these diseases up to thirty years ago, it must be remembered that the sulphonamide and the antibiotic eras had not yet dawned and that no effective therapy was yet available with the result that many patients with sepsis lost their lives and cases of trachoma ended in permanent blindness. Stories of accidents, such as falls from heights, scalding and involvement in vehicular traffic are also recorded. At times medical certificates over the signatures of prominent doctors were published as evidence of the gravity of the injury or illness sustained and of recovery therefrom (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1887).

MEDICAL PAINTINGS

782 532 346 353 These are of various sizes ranging from 5 × 12 to 18 × 24 inches. They were much more numerous in the past than they are to-day. Church walls, which are now bare, were covered with these small canvases and wooden panels. A number of these 'ex-votos' vanished many years ago as in the case of the Sanctuary of the Immaculate Conception of Qala in Gozo (Vella Haber 1946, p. 13). In other churches these pictures still existed in great numbers up to about thirty years ago but have now dwindled considerably, instances being those of the Cave chapel of the Annunciation and St Leonard at Minsija (Birkirkara), the church of Tal Mirakli (Lija), and Tal Hlas (Qormi). One of the sanc-

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

tuaries that remains particularly rich in painted 'ex-votos' is the church in the Tal Herba district (Birkirkara) erected in 1640 and dedicated to the Birth of the Holy Virgin. These panels are hung up, one above the other, almost up to the ceiling so that the following description written almost one hundred years ago still applies with regard to this particular church: 'On the walls one sees a considerable number of small paintings representing the favours received through the intercession of the Holy Virgin by those devotees who had recourse to her in their calamities' (Ferres 1866, p. 322). As far as could be ascertained the latest painting in this church is dated 1944.

On the whole these pictures are the work of self-taught anonymous folk who never regarded themselves as artists but only as humble craftsmen. In fact their productions often ignore the rules of perspective while the colours and the shading are poor; but in viewing them one must take account of the fact that they were not intended to be decorative pieces. They were simply meant to be pictorial records of the occurrence of a medical emergency that was thought to be beyond human control and which ended happily in an extraordinary manner through a supernatural act. Indeed these pictures portray the moment in which the physician confesses that there is nothing that medical art and science can do to save the patient's life and the instant in which the Divine intervention occurs. Thus we behold the Holy Mary relieving a choking girl or rescuing a pedestrian from being crushed by the wheel of a carriage or see Our Lady stopping a run-away horse and saving its rider from harm (Plate 2, Fig. 2); or else softening the impact of the fall from a height of a stone-mason so that he reaches the ground uninjured; or sparing the life of a farmer from an enraged beast (Plate 2, Fig. 1). In this task of graphically reproducing an event, these paintings succeed very well.

OTHER VOTIVE OFFERINGS

Other things offered for medical reasons consist of: (i) Surgical and orthopaedic appliances such as crutches, plaster jackets, leather corsets, iron splints, metal sutures, etc. (ii) Foreign bodies removed from organs such as stones from the kidneys, needles from fingers, hair-clips from the throat, swallowed thimble, etc. (iii) Babies' dresses, some of them embroidered with gold thread, are a characteristic feature of the Mellieha sanctuary. This custom of offering the child's clothing as a token for recovery from illness prevailed also in connexion with the tomb of the Holy Hermit Kurraw at the Qala sanctuary in Gozo. The grateful mothers of sick children used to deposit the clothing of their offspring on the hermit's grave as a sign that the disease had been transferred from the children's bodies on to their clothing (Vella Haber 1946, p. 14). Babies' dresses are also offered in thankagiving for an uneventful delivery and the birth of a normal infant. (iv) Wax tapers, decorated torches and bottles of olive oil for lighting the sanctuary lamp. (v) Sums of money. (vi) Jewellery is the most common 'ex-voto' to be seen to-day in Maltese churches. There are gold necklaces, finger-rings, brooches and other items of personal adornment. Apart from their intrinsic value, most of these gold ornaments represent the most prized possessions which the votary had to offer because they formed the most substantial part of a woman's dowry. To give an idea of the quantity of these valuable articles deposited in one single shrine during a month's time, here is a list, chosen at random from a religious periodical published in 1894: 'Sixteen gold rings, one pair of gold ear-rings with diamonds, two silver bracelets, a gold watch and a

1/A, 2/A [see plate II, facing p. 25 - An.]

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

782 silver medal, seventeen "ex-votos" of silver, and £39 10s. 6d. in cash' (*Id-devot ta Maria*, 1894). In November 1961 twenty-two gold rings and thirty-one pairs of gold ear-rings, besides sums of money, were offered as 'ex-votos' at the shrine of St Rita at St Augustine's Priory, Valletta (*Santa Rita*, 1961, p. 192).

DISCUSSION

154 782 771 753 761 The relief of anxiety is one of the basic needs of the human personality. In a religion-conditioned community, such as that of the Maltese Islands, one of the most potent defence mechanisms against life-threatening situations consists in prayer and the offer of 'ex-votos' to the Godhead in order to receive deliverance in return. Perhaps what underlies this aspect of human behaviour is the idea that sickness and death are punitive measures from the Godhead for lapses committed by oneself, one's relatives, or one's community. As a matter of fact, the notion that illness is sent by God as a punishment for sins is still a current folk-belief in the Maltese Islands. The same trend of thought finds expression in certain depressive psychoses where the patient shows a heightened feeling of guilt and is convinced that divine wrath has been visited upon himself and his close relatives in the form of disease or death. It appears, therefore, that the 'ex-voto' is not a mere token of gratitude for a favour received but is also a propitiatory offering to appease the offended deity and thus obtain his pardon and the removal of the punishment. The element of sacrifice is implied in the self-denying act of surrendering a precious thing in return for recovery of health or rescue from imminent death, either materially in the shape of money or jewellery, or symbolically in the form of an anatomical representation of one's body. Whatever the psychological motivation prompting the offer of 'ex-votos', there is no doubt that they throw an illuminating sidelight on the part played by religious belief in the history of healing in the Maltese Islands since prehistoric times. They are also a testimony to the beneficial influence of religious *mores* (1) in satisfying the natural craving for security felt by the individual and by the community when faced with the crises of life, and (2) in maintaining morale and the will to live when the failure of medical skill tends to disorganize and destroy them. Indeed the 'ex-votos' reveal the story of the triumph of hope and faith over the trials and sufferings of countless generations of Maltese men and women who had found themselves beyond the help of contemporary science and of human assistance. It is needless to emphasize the recasting of Maltese religious beliefs after their conversion to Christianity in A.D. 60.

154 782 171

[178] The change from paganism to Catholicism, coupled with technical and cultural developments, has brought about a parallel modification in the conventional form of the 'votiva'—from the baked clay image, the painted panel, and the wax and silver anatomical models to the exquisite examples of the jeweller's art; but the idea behind the changed outward sign remains immutable, i.e. the anxiety-relieving value of faith in a community where belief in an all-controlling God has, for thousands of years, been the pervasive character of the warp and woof of its cultural and psychological pattern.

4: Cassar P-4, 5 (no date) 1964 EZ6 Malta EZ6

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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1

CAPTIONS TO PLATES

PLATE I

Fig. 1. Silver votive offerings representing various parts of the body. The model between the trunk and the ear is a stylized form of the female breasts. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

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Fig. 2. This leg of baked clay is from the Roman ruins at Ras-ir-Raheb to the north west of Bahria, Malta. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

Fig. 3. Bronze dice of liver and lower limb used by Maltese silver smiths for the manufacture of the silver 'ex-votos'. Scale in centimetres and inches. (By courtesy of the Director of the National Museum, Valletta. Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

PLATE II

Fig. 1. The picture tells the story so clearly that no inscription is attached to it. Note the Maltese type of windmill and the costumes of the peasants still in use during the last century. Tal Hlas Church, Qormi. (Photograph by Jos. Spiteri.)

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Fig. 2. The landscape is not Maltese. Presumably this 'ex-voto' was offered by a foreigner or else the donor was a Maltese who met with a riding accident abroad. The letters V.F.G.A. stand for 'Votum Fecit Gratiam Accepit' (A vow was made and a favour received). Tal Mirakli Church, Lija, Malta. (Photograph by Captain C. Zammit, F.S.A.)

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1 [plate I will be found facing p. 24; plate II faces p. 25.– Ed.]

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

the deliverance from a large swarm of locusts that once caused a dreadful havoc in the Island. 796 174 [731]

Monsignor Duzina, the Apostolic Visitor, who visited Malta in February 1575, having found that the origin of this procession was involved in great obscurity, caused the most aged men of the Island to be brought before him, and on asking them about the origin of the institution of this general procession, he was informed that the tradition was "That the procession was founded by a general vow of the Maltese after their deliverance from the Turks, whose fleet was dispersed by a terrible storm at Marsascirocco,(*) just when the Moslems were on the point 796 174 782 648

(*) This is probably the reason that the general procession goes to the churches of St. Catherine and St. Gregory, those being the nearest churches to Marsascirocco.

796 of effecting a landing on the shores of
174 the Island.
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[782] It is an undeniable fact that the procession has been instituted in commemoration of some signal public deliverance. Of all the traditions, however, the most generally received is that which we read in the acts of the said Mons. Duzina's visit in 1575.

796 This procession used formerly to take place in lent, on St. Gregory's day, which falls on the 12th of March. That day was selected not because the above mentioned invasion occurred on that particular day, but because lent being the time of penance, our faithful forefathers thought that the vow would be more acceptable to God in lent. And the day of St. Gregory was chosen, that Saint being the founder of all processions which are solemnized by the Roman Catholic Church.

778 788 Sanctuary dedicated to the Blessed Virgin.

[782] [527] When the devout visitors recite their prayers in the venerated shrine of the Madonna, and leave behind their offerings, such as candles, oil to be burnt in the lamps before the image, waxen and silver limbs &c., they come out and devote the remainder of the day to amusements.

173 778 788 The annual pilgrimages to Melleha in September are supposed to have originated after the victory won by the Maltese over the Turks in 1565. The siege being raised on the 7th of Sept. —the eve of the day dedicated to the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin— the Maltese, in token of gratitude for the help received from the Virgin, in those trying days, made pilgrimages to Melleha, to offer prayers before the mirac-

7: Busuttil I, Y-4, 5 (no date) 1894
EZ6 Malta EZ6

769 there they proceed to the tombs of
796 their departed dear ones.

• [782] Here a widow and orphans are seen knelt in prayer at the vault of their respective husband and father, or perhaps some daughters at the resting place of their ever lost mother or father. There some father and mother contemplating the last abode of their beloved son in whom they had placed their future hopes; they are all there reverently and devoutly reciting prayers to the Almighty for the repose of the souls of their deceased.

The graves on these two days are very beautifully decorated. Some are literally covered by masses of flowers, some hung with wreaths and crosses woven of the loveliest blossoms, others converted into a temporary garden, with willows, cypress, and other shrubs.

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

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'He is January's own brother, bless him,' said the poor man. 'Quantities of rain and everyone satisfied, for February fills up all and brings riches to the peasant's house. In the month of February all mistakes are discovered. In February sow, water, and tend the small-leaved basil.'

'What a lot you know!' they all cried.

'Friend,' said March, 'what about March?'

'Days long and beautiful,' answered the peasant. 'The cold braces you like iron, and a little wind is always desirable.'

The poor man answered in this way each question of the rest of the months, letting his tongue wag in their honour, praising each one up to the skies."

The merchant, in reply to the same set of questions, complains bitterly about each month. The peasant is given a magic cloth of the sort used to cover bread, which provides him and his family with food and drink in plenty. The rich merchant receives a stick which beats him and his wife unmercifully every time it is addressed.

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Apart from the expected, usual characters of the twelve months, there is a method whereby the year's weather may be foretold. The twelve days preceding Christmas Eve are known as "presages." Each day foretells the weather of its corresponding month during the forthcoming year. Here, again, is seen the shadow of Mithra—the "Great Fecundator"—no period could be more ominous than the sacred twelve days preceding his feast.

FAITH

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Where knowledge fails or some error in complying with the traditional rules is made, Faith steps in. A farmer will send for the village priest to bless his fields when he has sown

8:Brockman T-5 (no date) 1938
EZ6 Malta EZ6

at the wrong season and so set right his error. The blessing is accompanied by the burning of leaves of the wild olive which have been blessed in Holy Week. Blessing, accompanied by sacred "fumigation," is very widely used—by fishermen to ensure a good catch, by newly married folk to ensure a happy house.

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GETTING MARRIED

Zeppu and Grez will think long and seriously before they get married. In an island where poverty is the rule rather than the exception, and there is no "dole," there can be no haphazard mating. Zeppu will wait until he has a sufficient competence and Grez will contribute her share of the common resources in the form of a "dot" which she, herself, has earned and saved. Until very recently all marriages were arranged by a professional "go-between"—an old woman wise in the ways of the world and in suitable matings. Even now there is little choice left to the girl.

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[735]

In this matter of marriage, so hedged about with Christian law and custom, the Old Things still command a place. Their hands are perhaps more apparent than in the marriage customs of all other countries—themselves pagan enough in origin.

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In the story which has been quoted the month of February is praised, amongst other reasons, because it is then that the "small-leaved basil" is tended and watered. The reference might be rendered "In the Spring a young man's fancy . . ." for the sweet basil is the sign and symbol that a marriageable girl awaits a suitor.

The small bush, either of basil or of the Madonna rose, is carefully tended and placed on the sill of an upper window. A well-grown plant is an indication that the maiden will make a good wife and mother.

[787]

A suitor, seeing the "marriage bush" at an upper window,